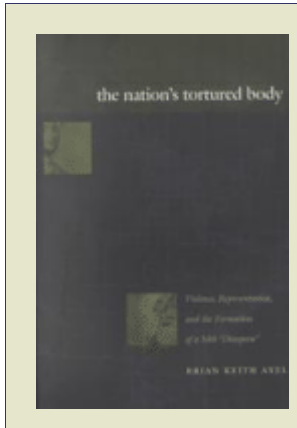


The Nation's Tortured Body; Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora": Brian Keith Axel (2001) [297P] ISBN: 0-8223-2615-9

A Book Review: Kavneet Singh



Brian Keith Axel is an associate professor of anthropology at Swarthmore College, PA with a doctorate from the University of Chicago. The well meaning Axel has made a valiant attempt to do a psycho-analysis and a postmortem on the thinking, motives and psychosis of the Sikh Diaspora in the western hemisphere in relation to the formation of the Sikh homeland called Khalistan; by using Maharaja Duleep Singh, cartography, torture of Sikhs by the Indian government, the 'pub' culture in the UK, and finally some of the politics of pushing the agenda of Khalistan in the West.

As Dalhousie said: "Do away with that and he has no longer any outward sign of a Sikh about him."In other words, there was no evidence of the religious symbols (the Five K's') associated with the amritdhari body that Guru Gobind Singh institutionalized in 1699. In the colonial discourse, the Sikh national feature did not signify a Sikh religion. Indeed, as I have noted, in 1854 the Sikh, Duleep Singh, was a celebrated Christian. Brian Axel first introduces the reader to the psychology behind the subtle stripping of Maharaja Duleep Singh all the "kakkars" by the British monarch, Queen Victoria and her minions through the context of the famous painting of the Prince. Axel glosses over and does not go into detail by explaining how the child prince Duleep Singh was literally kidnapped and forcibly coerced and taken away to England as a little child. Every crooked method including Christian Priests and also a Hindu servant were used to coerce and cajole Maharaja Duleep Singh to successfully convert him to Christianity. All the vile and chicanery which was at the disposal of the British was used very effectively. Once a Christian with literally no knowledge of the Sikh Faith other than the outward appearance stripping a person of their adornments which is of mere cultural significance does not carry any weight, just like Sadhu Sundar Singh a devout Christian walked around with appearance of Sikh. So stripping Sadhu Sundar Singh of his turban and other coverings would not make him less of a Sikh because he was never a Sikh to begin with. Furthermore the young Prince was too young to even be "formally initiated" as a Khalsa and was forced into Christianity and therefore the enactment of a Sikh Prince being stripped was moot, which was not missed by even an ordinary Sikh. Axel shows the remaking of a painting by British Sikhs of Prince Duleep Singh with some changes from

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the original painting by depicting the Prince in a better [Sikh] light seems to have a major effect on the Sikh psyche in reference to making their long lost empire more palpable in their own mind. Axel does not realize that the Sikhs believe in the "Chardi Kala", i.e., an ever uplifting unbounded optimism. This is inculcated to the Sikhs by their Faith.

Anyone whether they belong to a distinct ethnic or a religious group like to hold onto and cherish 'things' that they hold dear, regardless of their place in the world.

By generating and visualizing constitutive relations of people and places, cartography has not merely made possible a certain scopic recognition of the formative moment of the "new order" of territorial allegiance – that is, the sight, both pleasurable and violent, of subjectification. It has also constituted the anterior difference from which, in the fantasy of the people as one, the nation-state must emerge. In national cartography, the production of particular places, thus, also facilitates a displacement dramatized in the nation-state's fantasy as an abolition of places in the creation of a general place: the Dominion of India.

Axel uses the power of cartography to depict the fact that Sikh home, gurdwaras and even a "pub" in the UK has maps of Panjab displayed on their walls. This conveying the fact that the minds of the Sikhs are always focused on the pursuit of a homeland. Its not uncommon for Sikhs have maps of Panjab albeit whether it is the current Panjab in India or the old Panjab of long gone adorning their walls somewhere in their homes and sometimes even the Gurdwaras. But that is true of many Indian ethnic Hindu and other non-Indian diaspora groups. Therefore is one to surmise that all 'other' diaspora groups are yearning to form a homeland! That would be a very immature assumption to make by anyone. Does that automatically mean that a person is a Khalistani because he or she has map of Panjab which is not the precise official version blessed by the government of India. That would make anyone and everyone a criminal and further how would 'Indian law' apply to someone not living there. A simplistic example would be a large extended family adorning their walls with a photograph of an ancestral home which has been touched up to further enhance the quality, albeit not theirs anymore; but does that automatically mean that now after many years bygone, they all yearn to go and take over that; anyway they can if they have to. Now that is pure hogwash.

Glassy Junction appropriates and transforms familiar and powerful signs of Englishness: the pub and the pint.....The centerpiece of the pub is a map of Panjab that hangs on the wall opposite the bar in the main room. The map stands five feet tall and projects..... On one of the walls, above a few agricultural tools, are two clocks: one displays "Southhall" time, and the other "Panjab" time.....

Axel weaves the narrative in this chapter by explaining the proximity of Panjab and Britain in the Sikh mind playing out eventually into the Khalistani overtones. All over North America there are Irish, German, Dutch and various other European pubs-bars which are extremely ethnic in nature; right from picture signs or poster signs in ethnic costumes, national flags hung along with the American flag, all kinds of ethnic implements, costumes, pictures to remind the patron if he/she is from the old country and create a nostalgia and an atmosphere whereby to making them stay as long as possible to spend money. I wonder if all these pubs are making political statements and creating political activists out of their respective regular patrons?

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"These protestors were themselves diaspora Sikh men whose activism was organized by several Sikh professors from various institutions in the United States and Canada, most of whom were avowed Khalistanis, representing a different group of scholars than those invited to the conference."

It is interesting to note how Axel could figure out that all the protestors outside the conference venue were "avowed Khalistanis." It never occurred to Axel that there could be Sikhs present who are there, purely to protest, because of what had been written for years by the so-called scholars sitting inside the hallowed halls of the University of Michigan where the Sikh Studies conference was being held. In order to get a balanced and fair outcome an open conference and discussion will always, in any setting bring out a balance for the audience to finally decide for themselves. A meeting of all the scholars with a particular view will only bring about a lopsided outcome and the closed doors will only create more hostility and further suspicion of an agenda with ulterior motives.

"Oberoi's book is a through analysis of the culture, identity, and diversity in Sikh tradition."

This claim by Axel in reference to Harjot Oberoi's book, "The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition", shows his depth of understanding in relation to the Sikh Faith and History in general, otherwise his above comment would be very different.

"The public and private batterings have made the names of W.H.Mcleod, Harjot Oberoi and Pashura Singh commonly known names to Sikhs all over the world. In fact, I have been often questioned about them, and more often plainly told about their supposedly malicious practices, by Sikhs in India and Europe. Very often, I have been told about them by people who nevertheless refuse to read their work."

Axel assumes that no one has read books by the above three so-called scholars. It would surprise him that there many Sikhs who make it a point to particularly read their [Mcleod and his ex-student's] books thoroughly and write critical analysis's with proper references. There is plenty of evidence of this in the form of books, periodicals and on the internet which a scholar like Axel if need be can very easily access. Instead of answering rebuttals in a logical cogent manner, Mcleod and his clique never ever reply, instead blame all the Sikhs, for their own sloppy and overtly biased scholarship and yet keep crying wolf!

"W.H.Mcleod (1998, 1999) has offered his own powerful and insightful critique of Sikh Studies. In particular, he has covered many of the issues I introduce in the chapter, including the use of the term, "fundamentalism" and the demonizing of Oberoi, Pashura Singh, and himself. I am very much in agreement with his conclusions – although I cannot engage them here – and hope that the analyses in this chapter maybe taken as a supplement".

Axel again very clearly agrees with the 'headhunter' Mcleod either out of sheer ignorance which is probably not true; then the only other possible explanation seems to be that he purposely chooses to ignore Mcleod's major shortcoming and failings in doing

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proper research and furthermore never once checking other resources which are easily available, to; at the very least, give a more balanced conclusion. The book, "Invasion of the Religious Boundaries", edited by Dr. J.S.Mann, Dr.S.S.Sodhi, et.al, rebutting Harjot Oberoi's work seems to have been the only material Axel used to draw his conclusions in reference to the "Khalistani Authors". This book contains no less than 24 well known scholars of high repute. Nineteen of them with Ph.D's two with law degrees, two from (ex)-Indian Administrative Service and one with double masters in the Sciences. Time and time again he refers to all [these] academic scholars who refute McLeod and his clique, as Khalistanis. Furthermore little does Axel realize that if he took the time to research these "Khalistani authors" he is alluding to in his book very often, the vast majority of them are not even anywhere close to being involved in any kind of politics at all; or furthermore in his patronizing terms "orthodox Sikhs", in fact, are doing full time research purely on the Sikh Faith and History. Further if only Axel had read any of the books written by even one of the 24 authors he may have had a more unbiased result. This shows that Axel is keenly aware of the 'other' authors but instead of reading and researching their books he chose to consciously ignore them, instead labeling them as 'Khalistanis'. Oberoi and their clique are experts at applying new labels to Sikhs of all shades, without any proof whatsoever. Does that make all well meaning Jews trying to correct and/or be critical of "any" scholar who chooses to write material detrimental to the fundamentals of their Faith be branded as "Rabid-Israeli-Zionists" by non-Jewish scholars?

My respect for the Sikh diaspora, unfortunately, is met with the limits of my own techniques of research and writing. If anything, writing this story of the Sikh diaspora has taught me – as the cliché says – that there is yet much more to learn.

Axel does acknowledge his limitations. Axel never once mention's any other ethnic or religious group which he can compare or contrast with, to put his entire thesis in perspective. An example of the Jews who very similar in many ways to the Sikhs and their entire modus-operandi before and after acquiring their supposed long lost land was never mentioned even once. Even though Axel tries to be respectful and mindful of the Sikhs, he inadvertently ends being offensive by patronizingly portraying the Sikhs as delusional.

Practically all the books used by Axel to write this book, are McLeod's and his entourage of disciples. There is a whole slew of books which might have given a more meaningful understanding of the Sikh mind in the Diaspora are missing from his bibliography. A very superficial book, to say the least.